

KILLER QUAKE HITS MEXICO CAPITAL IN CHAOS; DEATH REPORTS RISE

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A major earthquake today caused severe damage in three Mexican states, collapsed buildings in Mexico City and sent the city into chaos. Death reports ranged from the dozens to the thousands.

Television scenes from Mexico City showed buildings in rubble and streets ablaze from natural gas from broken pipelines. One report said 35 percent of the city's buildings were damaged.

Howard L. Lester, an amateur radio operator in Schenectady, N.Y. said he monitored a transmission between a Mexico City operator and another in Tucson, Ariz.

Speaking in English, the Mexico City operator said:

"This is no joke. . . . We have only one radio channel left. It's a government channel. We're trying to get it working so we can tell the world what is happening."

The government was asking for donations of blood and gasoline for emergency vehicles.

The Mexican Embassy in Washington said cathedrals had collapsed in Jalisco, Guerrero and Michoacan states, all on the country's west coast, and that several buildings collapsed in the capital. Telephone and Telex circuits to Mexico City were out and flights from the United States were canceled, one airline official said, "because we didn't know what we would find when we got there."

The quake struck at 8:18 a.m., Chicago time, and registered 7.8 on the Richter scale, an open-ended measurement of ground motion.

The U.S. Geological Survey put the epicenter in the Pacific Ocean about 250 miles southwest of Mexico City.

In Washington, State Department spokesman Bernard Kalb said the U.S. Embassy was undamaged and communications with the embassy had been established.

Kalb said there was significant damage in the old section of the city, including the popular tourist

area of Zona Rosa, a fashionable and hotel district in the center of the city.

A Laredo, Texas, radio station said it had a report from Mexico City station XEQ that it had confirmed at least 20 deaths.

XEQ said 200 injuries had been reported, that one-third of the city was without electricity and that several gas leaks had been reported.

A reporter for the station said one hospital was full and had asked that the injured be taken elsewhere. Residents of the city were told to stay in their homes, XEQ said.

The Mexican reporter told Laredo station KVOZ that much of the destruction was felt in the business district of Mexico City.

Amateur radio operator Glenn Baxter of Belgrade Lakes, Maine, said he had been in radio contact with Carlos Sartorius of Mexico City.

Baxter said Sartorius, a Motorola engineer, had found highways blocked by "pieces of buildings," had passed many dead people in the streets and had seen doctors and nurses from one hospital "taking all the people out to the street because they thought it was safer."

A spokeswoman for the Mexican Embassy in Washington, Pilar Franzoni, said two areas to the north of downtown Mexico City - Colonia Roma and Colonia Doctores - sustained heavy damage.

"In Mexico City several buildings have fallen," she said. "Part of an office of the Ministry of the Navy in Mexico City's downtown area fell down. There was fire in the communications tower in Mexico City and also part of a building of the Ministry of Labor."

Sartorius said he had seen little damage in the southern sections of the capital.

In Tijuana, a local cable TV channel showed pictures from Mexico City and an announcer said deaths were considered to be in the thousands.

Ambulances and rescue crews were being hampered by a lack of gasoline. Hotels and other

buildings on the Paseo Dela Reforma, and Insurgentes Avenue, the city's major thoroughfares, were heavily damaged.

The University of Mexico was shown to have been damaged.

In Houston, several large buildings were reported to have swayed, with window shades banging against the windows. Water was reported sloshing out of swimming pools in Texas and New Mexico.

Doug Whitehead, assistant property manager at the Transco Tower, a 64-story, glistening skyscraper in southwest Houston, said tenants reported hearing a creaking noise and saw the blinds swaying.

No damage was reported in South Texas, although many people reported they felt the quake.

The earthquake was the strongest in the world since another 7.8-magnitude earthquake near the coast of central Chile on March 3, 1985, that killed at least 177 people, injured more than 2,500 others, and caused extensive damage, the survey said.

More than 700 people were killed and more than 300 miles of southeastern Mexico were left a shambles by a quake measured at 6.5 on the Richter scale in September 1973, when at least 24 cities, towns and villages were damaged.

An earthquake of 3.5 on the Richter scale can cause slight damage in the local area; 4 moderate damage; 5 considerable damage, and 6 severe damage. A 7 reading is a "major" earthquake, capable of widespread heavy damage; 8 is a "great" quake, capable of tremendous damage.

The San Francisco earthquake of 1906, which occurred before the Richter scale was devised, has been estimated at 8.3 magnitude.

The Richter scale is a measure of ground motion as recorded on seismographs.

Every increase of one number means a tenfold increase in magnitude. Thus a reading of 7.5 reflects an earthquake 10 times stronger than one of 6.5.